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# **Terrorism and the *banlieues*: The Charlie Hebdo Attacks in Context**

Matthew Moran

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## **Abstract**

*In January 2015, French society was shocked by a sequence of fatal attacks at the offices of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a Kosher supermarket in Paris. In the wake of these tragic events, many social and political commentators interpreted the killings as an assault on freedom of expression and core French values of liberty, equality and laïcité. Prime Minister Manuel Valls described the perpetrators as disciples of Islamofascism. More than this, the terrorists were represented as the extreme manifestation of a deviant and nihilistic 'other' - largely concentrated in France's infamous banlieues - that rejected the Republic and embraced a form of ideological extremism that originated beyond France's borders. Yet this interpretation fails to adequately consider the complexity of the situation. Drawing on the work on radicalization by Wiktorowicz, and illustrated with lessons learned from research into the causes of the 2005 French riots, this article has two objectives: to highlight the importance of everyday exclusion in the web of causal factors that frames the path to violent extremism in France; and to offer an alternative view of the role and influence of the banlieues in this context.*

*En janvier 2015, la société française a été ébranlée par une série d'attentats mortels à Paris, d'abord dans les locaux du journal satirique Charlie Hebdo puis dans un supermarché casher. A la suite de ces événements tragiques, de nombreux commentateurs ont vu dans ces attentats une attaque contre la liberté d'expression et les valeurs françaises fondamentales de liberté, d'égalité et de laïcité. Selon le Premier ministre Manuel Valls, les auteurs étaient des disciples de « l'islamo-fascisme ». Au-delà, les terroristes ont été représentés comme la manifestation radicale d'un « Autre » en rupture de ban et nihiliste – largement concentré dans des banlieues repoussoir – qui aurait rejeté la République et épousé la cause d'un extrémisme idéologique importé de l'étranger. Cependant, une telle interprétation échoue à rendre compte de la complexité de la situation. Cet article, qui s'appuie sur les travaux de Wiktorowicz sur la radicalisation ainsi que sur les enseignements tirés de recherches conduites sur les causes des émeutes françaises de 2005 poursuit deux objectifs : souligner l'importance de l'exclusion quotidienne dans le tissu de facteurs menant à l'extrémisme violent et offrir une approche alternative du rôle et de l'influence des banlieues dans ce cadre*

## **Introduction**

On 9 January 2015, the front page of French daily newspaper *Le Monde* featured a striking headline: 'le 11-Septembre français' (*Le monde*, 9 January 2015). The powerful reference to the events of 2001 in New York reflected the profound sense of shock at the worst terrorist attacks on French soil in a generation. Two days previously, a pair of heavily armed gunmen, Chérif and Saïd

Kouachi, had opened fire in the Parisian offices of satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The attack left twelve people dead and several others injured. In a related incident, Amédry Coulibaly, another terrorist known to the Kouachi brothers, shot a policewoman before killing four hostages at a kosher supermarket, also in Paris. The attacks saw France's 'Vigipirate' national security alert system raised to its highest level in the Ile-de-France region and prompted an enormous operation that ultimately saw all three terrorists killed by police.

These events had nothing of the scale and coordination of the subsequent November 2015 attacks that left 130 dead and many more injured, yet the Charlie Hebdo shootings were significant for at least three reasons. First, the shootings represented the most serious terrorist attacks since the bombing of the Paris metro by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1995. Indeed, in the two decades leading up to 2015, France had “developed a reputation as Europe's ‘counterterrorism powerhouse’”, managing to avoid major jihadist attacks such as those that hit the United States and the United Kingdom (Foley, 2015). The Charlie Hebdo attacks thus marked an important turning point.

Second, as France struggled to understand the nature and causes of the horrific attacks, the media were quick to note that each of the terrorists had links to the Parisian *banlieues* and commentary was soon grounded in these “badlands of the Republic” (Dikec, 2007). The attacks were condemned as an assault on freedom of expression and core French values of liberty, equality and *laïcité*, the French form of secularism, by disciples of what Prime Minister Manuel Valls described as Islamofascism. More than this, the terrorists were represented as the extreme manifestation of a deviant and nihilistic ‘other’ that rejected the Republic and embraced a form of ideological extremism that originated beyond France's borders. This ‘othering’ narrative aligned with popular perceptions of the *banlieues* as a place apart, a community of immigrant descent marked by its refusal to integrate into mainstream French society. The Prime Minister was clear in his claim that France was engaged in “une guerre contre le terrorisme et l’islamisme radical, contre tout ce qui vise à briser la solidarité, la liberté, la fraternité” (*France Soir*, 10 January 2015). For some, the battleground was easily identifiable as the *banlieues* that are so regularly portrayed as hotbeds of terrorism (Bajekal, 2015).

Third, for some time prior to the Charlie Hebdo shootings, “France had been deeply concerned about potential attacks by a new wave of French jihadis returning from Syria, and had recently stepped up anti-terrorism measures”. Yet these were not battle-hardened fighters returning from the Syrian conflict, even if waging jihad in the Middle East appeared at one point to be an aspiration - Chérif Kouachi “was arrested in January 2005 on his way to catch a flight in Damascus, believed to be ultimately heading for Iraq” (Chrisafis, 2015b). It is true that at least one of the Kouachi brothers travelled to Yemen in 2011, likely for training from the Al Qaeda affiliate there. Yet this was a brief trip and subsequent surveillance by the French authorities, alerted to the trip by their US counterparts, found nothing of significance prior to phone surveillance being terminated in mid-2014 (Borger, 2015). The attacks of January 2015 were perpetrated by French citizens whose violent extremism was cultivated within the borders of the Republic.

How, then, should these tragic events be interpreted and understood? What lessons can be learned about the aetiology of radicalization and violent Islamist extremism in contemporary France? What is the significance of the link between terrorism and the *banlieues* and does it accurately reflect the reality on the ground?

The Kouachi brothers and Amédry Coulibaly were seduced by the violent extremism emanating from conflicts in Middle Eastern countries, but there were important domestic contextual factors that framed their path to violent extremism. This will come as no surprise to scholars of

terrorism – a significant body of literature exists on the nature and causes of terrorism, and much of it incorporates these issues. Yet the significance of these factors was ignored in the Manichean perspective that underpinned the ‘official’ narrative in France, as well as that of many other political and social commentators. In particular, the explanatory link established between the events of January 2015 and the *banlieues*, and the implicit suggestion that the attacks represented an extension of the nihilistic and rejectionist nature of the *banlieues* is flawed. The *banlieues* may have an important role to play in understanding radicalization and violent extremism in France, but not for the reasons that found expression in popular discourse.

Drawing on the work on radicalization by Wiktorowicz, and illustrated with lessons learned from research into the causes of the 2005 French riots, this article has two objectives: to highlight the importance of everyday exclusion in the web of causal factors that frames the path to violent extremism in France; and to offer an alternative view of the role and influence of the *banlieues* in this context. Let me be clear from the outset, the essay does not seek to provide any new conceptual insights into radicalization. Terrorism studies is already densely populated with theoretical approaches for understanding pathways to violent extremism. Rather, my analysis addresses on one hand, issues relating to social fracture and the sense of rootlessness that characterises the experience of many young French people whose origins are linked to the Republic’s colonial past, and on the other, the failings of the French model of integration, the implementation of which has fallen short of its lofty ideals. If radicalization has gained ground in the *banlieues*, it is at least in part due to the fact that the social and political exclusion that marks life in the French *banlieues* contributes to an “identity crisis” which, in turn, creates space for the “cognitive openings” that can open the door to radicalization and, ultimately, violent extremism (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 92).

### **Free speech, French values and the construction of the ‘other’**

Within hours of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’ was trending on Twitter. At its height, the ‘#JeSuisCharlie’ hashtag was tweeted at a rate of 6,500 times per minute and in the process became one of the most popular in Twitter history (Whitehead, 2015). This virtual response was driven by a sense of solidarity with the victims and a desire to support “Charlie Hebdo’s alleged ‘values’: freedom of speech and an anti-establishment stand (against all ‘established powers’, be they political, religious, or economic)” (Marlière, 2015a, 1). In France, the ‘Je suis Charlie’ slogan was presented as a bastion of republican values against a violent and extremist other. Beyond the ether, the attacks prompted an unprecedented display of national unity in France with almost four million taking to the streets of French cities to express their disgust at the terrorists’ actions in a series of ‘unity marches’ (*BBC News*, 11 January 2015).

The widespread display of national unity that followed the attacks was given additional momentum by the response in the political arena. The Hollande administration appeared particularly keen to rally public opinion under the ‘Je suis Charlie’ banner. More cynical commentators viewed this as a means of diverting attention from deeply “unpopular recessionist austerity policies” that had left President Hollande languishing in the polls (Willsher, 2015). In any case, the attacks provided the Hollande administration with an opportunity to embrace what Marlière (2015b) termed “the expected Gallic response to those tragic events: a brand of patriotism, which mixes abstract statements about the ‘Country of the Rights of Man and the Citizen’, and references to the so-called ‘universal values’ of the French ‘republican model’”. In a press conference soon after the events of 7 January, for example, the President claimed that “La France a

été attaquée dans ce qu'elle avait de plus sacré : la liberté d'expression, la République et l'égalité humaine" (*Elysée*, 5 February 2015).

In this context, the political rhetoric surrounding the Charlie Hebdo attacks quickly expanded beyond the issue of freedom of speech. At stake here was nothing less than the French republican model and its core values of liberty, fraternity and laïcité. In general terms, this theme resounded across the political spectrum. The Parti communiste français (PCF) claimed that "L'heure est aujourd'hui à rassembler autour des valeurs républicaines le maximum de forces, de citoyennes et de citoyens" (*L'Humanité*, 7 January 2015). To the right of the political spectrum, former president and, until recently, leader of Les Républicains Nicolas Sarkozy was equally forceful in his condemnation of this attack on the Republic: "Notre démocratie est attaquée, nous devons la défendre sans faiblesse. La fermeté absolue est la seule réponse possible. La France est frappée au cœur, la République doit se rassembler" (*Le Monde*, 7 January 2015).

This combative narrative presented the situation in binary terms: those who rallied under the 'Je suis Charlie' banner in defence of free speech and the broader values that underpin French society, and a subversive 'other' who did not. This amorphous 'other' was presented in deviant terms, as a threat to social cohesion and national unity. Indeed, what were the terrorists but the most extreme manifestation of this 'other', a nihilistic group of individuals that rejected the values and laws of the Republic in favour of a destructive ideology rooted in the sectarian conflicts of the Middle East. Consider the words of Nathalie Saint-Cricq, the chief political editor of the main public TV channel, France 2: "We must locate those who are not Charlie...they are those we have to spot, treat and integrate or reintegrate into the national community" (cited in Fassin, 2015a, 3). This Manichean interpretation left little room for discussion or dissent and had important consequences. On one hand, it served to undermine the unity that marked the days after the attacks: "Critics started mocking the 'mythology' of the movement; they questioned its 'false unanimity' as well as the authoritarian consensus imposed on the French nation by the French government". On the other hand, it framed a process of scapegoating as people sought to ground the powerful sentiments of anger and outrage generated by the attacks. For although this "suspicious group [of people who were not Charlie] was heterogeneous, including people from all faiths as well as those without any, the emphasis and indignation concentrated on Muslims" (Marlière, 2015a, 1).

If the othering process was demographically focused on Muslims, casting suspicion on their role and place in French society, it was geographically grounded in the *banlieues*. A link between the terrorists and France's infamous suburbs was quickly established – Chérif Kouachi had an apartment in the Parisian *banlieue* of Gennevilliers while Amedy Coulibaly grew up on a housing estate in Grigny, to the south of the city – and "les tueries de Charlie Hebdo et du magasin Hyper Cacher de la porte de Vincennes sont présentées, par les médias comme par les politiques, comme un symptôme de la crise des banlieues" (Zappi, 2015). This perspective was further fuelled by "media reports that students in scores of high schools in disadvantaged multi-ethnic banlieues [...] had refused to observe a nationwide minute of silence in memory of those killed in the attacks" (Hargreaves, 2015b, 1). Much was made of the fact that some students had "contested the cartoonists' right to mock the Prophet" (Fassin, 2015b). Some 200 incidents of this kind were recorded by the Ministry and the response was severe, including "school suspension and [...] court summons. Forty such cases led to formal prosecutions, sometimes for 'vindication of terrorism'" (Fassin, 2015a, 4).

Broadly speaking, the othering process constructed a web of association between two of the most sensitive issues in contemporary French society – Islam and the *banlieues* – and the murderous ideological tropes forged in the violent, sectarian conflicts of the Middle East. Yet in the

rush to attribute blame, politicians and commentators failed to engage in a meaningful effort to comprehend the domestic social, cultural and even political factors that may have influenced the journey of those involved in the events. Or indeed, how simplistic representations of Islam and the *banlieues* might form part of the problem rather than part of the explanation. More than this, “the rightwing contempt for any efforts to “understand” the causes of terrorism [were] adopted by key figures in the Socialist government, including the prime minister, Manuel Valls. In the aftermath of last November’s attacks he rounded on those who ‘seek excuses or cultural or sociological explanations for what happened’” (de Bellaigue, 2015). This narrow intellectual approach is problematic. The Charlie Hebdo attackers may have “framed their actions squarely as part of a [broader] jihadist war on behalf of Islam and against Jews and the French state”, but the causal factors that open the door to radicalization and violent extremism are inextricably linked to the everyday lived experience of those most vulnerable to the process (Hargreaves, 2015a, 245). In this context, research on radicalization and particularly the work of Wiktorowicz provides a useful lens through which the nuances of the situation can be more clearly viewed.

### **The Journey to Violent Extremism**

Since the early 2000s, the concept of radicalization has gained traction as a “vehicle for policy-makers to explore the process by which a terrorist [is] made and to provide an analytical grounding for preventative strategies that [go] beyond the threat of violence or detention” (Kundnani, 2012, 4). While the concept remains highly contested on a number of fronts – including the suitability of the term itself – at stake here is the accumulation of associations, beliefs, ideas and influences that frame the progression of an individual down the path of potentially violent extremism.

Academics and other commentators have adopted a range of conceptual approaches in their efforts to explain radicalization and, more specifically, the move towards violent extremism. From Smelser’s interest in “structural strains” to Sageman’s focus on the dynamics of social networks, there has been no shortage of attempts to make sense of the myriad factors influencing how and why people embrace terrorism (Smelser, 2007; Sageman, 2004). By their own admission, none of these authors offers an all-encompassing answer to these questions, yet each contributes to a broader understanding of “the range of conditions and causes of terrorism [...] and demonstrate how they funnel by different processes toward the special violent outcomes that constitute terrorism” (Smelser, 2007, 15).

In France, debate regarding radicalization and violent extremism is most frequently framed in sociological terms. Three scholars in particular – Gilles Kepel, Farhad Khosrokhavar, and Olivier Roy – have made significant contributions here. Although by no means in complete agreement – Roy describes recent events in terms of the “Islamicization of radicalism” while Kepel argues the opposite: the radicalization of Islam – they all highlight the significance of identity in the causal equation (Nossiter, 2016). More specifically, they argue that “radicalization occurs as individuals seek to reconstruct a lost identity in a perceived hostile and confusing world” (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, 499). Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) summarises the key contention of the group effectively: “violent radicalization arises out of the particular challenges faced by an increasingly Westernized generation of young Muslims in Europe, who attempt to carve out an identity for themselves [...] Militant Islamism, according to these scholars, offers a potential ‘answer’ to the resulting search for identity, dignity, and meaning”. This emphasis on identity finds resonance in the broader literature and counters misleading analyses that claim “terrorism is ‘caused’ by psychopaths [and] fanatics”, even as it seeks to go beyond reductive explanations with an overriding focus structural issues. Yet

its explanatory value is significantly increased when considered alongside the work of Quentin Wiktorowicz, whose research provides a nuanced insight into how problems associated with identity feed directly into the radicalization process.

In his work on Islamist extremism, Wiktorowicz argues that a “necessary precondition” to the often complex and lengthy process of radicalization is that individuals experience a “cognitive opening”, whereby they become willing to engage with new, fundamentally different worldviews and belief systems. Radical activists seek to [...] create and exploit these cognitive openings by shak[ing] certitude in previously held beliefs and generat[ing] a sense of crisis and urgency” (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 85). Yet the process may also occur organically, without targeted action on the part of activists. As Kundnani explains, “Emotional distress (such as a death in the family), experiences of discrimination, political repression, confusion over identity” are all factors that could precipitate a cognitive opening on the part of the individual concerned (Kundnani, 2012, 17). In his empirical study of the British Muslim community, Wiktorowicz found that the lived experience of this disparate and heterogeneous segment of the population provided a powerful contextual impetus for the cognitive openings that allowed for the possibility of radicalization. A key factor in this case is the deep uncertainty and frustration experienced by Muslims regarding their role and place in British society:

Should Muslims fully assimilate and integrate? Is there a hybrid Islam capable of reconciling competing pressures [such as the clash between religious principles and Western perspectives and laws regarding issues like alcohol, gambling, homosexuality, etc.]? Should Muslims withdraw from the broader society and live parallel lives? Should they interact and, if so, how? How does one reconcile ‘being British’ with ‘being Muslim’? (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 87).

Crucially, Wiktorowicz claims that “the urgency of this question is partially driven by the widespread perception among Muslims that they are not accepted by British society”. Widespread and repeated experiences of abuse linked to their religious affiliation, associated racial discrimination, and the belief among many Muslims that “the law treats them more harshly because of their religion” has contributed to a profound sense of exclusion (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 87). More than this, the lived experience of British Muslims has contributed to an identity crisis of sorts: disconnected from British society, many of these individuals seek to ground their social identity elsewhere, in religion or ideology for example, as they strive to fill the gap left by their rejection (real or perceived) by mainstream society. Consider the following quote from one of the young people interviewed by Wiktorowicz (2005, 90):

Many of the kinds of problems in society like racism, the breakdown of the social structure of society, the stigmatization attached to your own religion, your own colour, and your own nationality, all of these things have pushed many people, youth especially, to reevaluate their own religion and their own ideology and that has led to a massive revival taking place.

This retreat to religion or ideology not only accommodates the growing disillusionment with mainstream society, but compounds and magnifies it, subtly opening the door to radicalization and, potentially, violent extremism. Wiktorowicz notes that: “amid this crisis, [radical Islamist groups] tries to offer an identity of empowerment [...] Activists hope that the cognitive opening prompted by the identity crisis will enhance the prospects that young Muslims looking for a sense of

belonging will turn to al-Muhajiroun [or another such group] for their ‘political identity and din’ [religion]”. Clearly, the embrace of radical alternative worldviews does not always or inevitably lead to violence, yet “the individuals who experience a cognitive opening constitute a broad potential recruitment pool” for extremist groups (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 85).

The idea of cognitive openings and their role in facilitating the move towards violent extremism holds powerful resonance in the context of the French *banlieues*, as do many aspects of the British experience described by Wiktorowicz. If radicalization has gained any ground in the suburbs, the situation owes much to the fundamental problems of identity experienced by inhabitants in these areas.<sup>1</sup> These young people are rejected by mainstream society and it is the identity crisis caused by their exclusion – social, cultural and political – that creates potential for the cognitive openings that Wiktorowicz regards as a crucial step in the radicalization process. To understand this how this situation has come about, however, it is first necessary to consider the evolution of the *banlieues* as areas that concentrate many of the challenges facing French society.

### **Life at the Limits of the Republic**

The term ‘banlieues’ holds particular significance in French society. For decades now, it has been synonymous with certain French suburban landscapes marked by severe social and economic problems. The enormous concrete apartment blocks that characterise these areas have their origins in the post-war French economic boom of 1945 to 1975. During this period, tens of thousands of workers, most of whom were of Muslim heritage, were recruited from former French colonies in northern Africa. These migrants, intended as a temporary workforce that would aid reconstruction after the war, soon became permanent settlers, triggering a severe housing crisis. At the time of their construction in the 1950s and 1960s, the housing projects in the *banlieues* were viewed as an innovative solution to the housing crisis. Yet these areas soon became concentrations of the most underprivileged members of French society. The situation was made worse by the geographical location of the housing estates. Physical segregation compounded the social and economic problems of the *banlieues* as they were located at the periphery of major cities with poor transport links.

These early developments set the *banlieues* on a spiral of decline that gained momentum as the years progressed. In this regard, Sutterlüty highlights the impact on the *banlieues* of the world-wide economic downturn that accompanied the onset of the twenty-first century. Widespread deindustrialisation and disproportionately high youth unemployment rates had important impoverishing and demoralizing effects. Moran and Waddington (2016, 44) note that “by the 1990s, youth unemployment had reached 20 per cent (twice the national average) and *over 30 per cent* in the suburbs. Moreover, increasing impoverishment in the *banlieues* resulted in the closure of local shopping complexes, whilst the gradual dilapidation or demolition of the apartment blocks, which had been neglected for years, not only compounded local feelings of distress but also stigmatized residents as they tried in vain to find work”.

The long process of social and economic atrophy that saw these areas progressively pushed to the limits of French society was also heavily influenced by ethnic and cultural factors: “Somatic difference, religious difference and changing perceptions regarding immigrants were just some of the factors driving sociocultural exclusion and contributing to the growing divide between the suburbs and mainstream society” (Moran and Waddington, 2016, 43). In his work, Hargreaves shows how perceptions of this population of immigrant origins were constructed in negative, invasive terms: identifiers such as ‘Muslim’ and ‘Arab’ – and subsequently ‘Maghrebi’ – “served to designate not simply or even primarily religious or ethnic categories, but above all a condition of



political, social and economic subordination”. This community was discriminated against – particularly from the 1980s onwards when events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran blurred “the distinction between Islam as a system of religious belief and Islamism as a political project” – due to both their religious affiliation (real or perceived) and their immigrant origins. A key issue at stake here was “the compatibility of the nation’s Muslim minority as a whole with the secular principles of the Republic” (Hargreaves, 2015a, 238). Despite a long-standing presence in French society, the Muslim community was progressively represented in negative terms as a threat to social cohesion.

The destructive spiral that gained momentum in the 1970s has continued to the present day. In the contemporary *banlieues*, high levels of unemployment, crime and delinquency frame daily life. Police-public relations are abysmal and the tensions that pervade these areas frequently find form in sporadic outbursts of rioting on the part of young residents.<sup>2</sup> The over-representation of ethnic minorities mean that the suburbs concentrate national fears regarding immigration, integration and social cohesion, and a pattern of public disorder that stretches back to the early 1980s has nourished popular perceptions of the *banlieues* as no-go areas existing in the shadows of French society. Henri Rey (1996, 7) sums up the situation well:

En France, plus particulièrement, parler des banlieues c’est désigner le point fragile de l’équilibre social, celui qui risque de rompre. Les banlieues seraient prêtes à exploser, la loi républicaine y serait outragée, l’insécurité y régnerait. Banlieues de la peur, “banlieues de l’Islam” aussi. Une forme inédite de contre-société aux règles difficiles à identifier dresserait les populations étrangères contre les principes de laïcité par lesquels notre pays a fini par surmonter ses divisions tribales”.

Rey’s description of the *banlieues* and the manner in which they are perceived was written in 1996, yet little has changed in the years since then. If anything, the gap that separates these underprivileged areas from mainstream society has widened. The 2005 riots that exploded in suburban areas across France and prompted a national state of emergency served as a violent reminder of the depth of the *malaise* that pervades these areas and the extent to which they are disjointed from mainstream society. More recently, in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Prime Minister Valls spoke of “un apartheid territorial, social, ethnique, qui s’est imposé à notre pays” (*Le Monde*, 20 January 2015). Demonised in political and popular discourse, the suburbs are widely perceived as a place apart, a sociocultural anomaly that is far removed from idealised notions of the Republic.

## **Banlieues de l’Islam**

The threat posed by Islamist extremism to Western societies is a relatively new one, but here too the *banlieues* have galvanised popular fears and concerns in recent years. Broadly-speaking, there are three issues at play here. First is the generalised apprehension and unease resulting from the perceived challenge posed by Islam to *laïcité*, a core republican principle that is rooted in the separation of church and state, enshrined as law in 1905. Originally, *laïcité* was “designed by staunch republicans to curb the power of a church openly nostalgic for the pre-revolutionary political order” and, at root, the “concept is fundamentally liberal: the 1905 law (which is still on the books) mandates the privatisation of religion precisely in order to guarantee its free exercise” (Giry, 2006, 89). As the term was politicised from the 1980s onwards, however, its conceptual

reach became more expansive. This broader perspective – notably expressed by President Chirac in his 2003 speech on religious signs in public schools – holds that *laïcité* “designates not a specific set of rules regarding religious expression, but rather a protected, privileged, multifunctional social space within which Republican principles could survive and prosper”. This expansive understanding of *laïcité* framed the 2004 law banning ostentatious religious symbols in public spaces. Yet as Bowen notes, the “notion of protected public space goes far beyond the law of 1905 which constrains the state, not pupils or other ordinary citizens” (Bowen, 2007, 32).

In this context, Islam was progressively positioned as a threat to French republican values. By the time of the 2004 law, widely recognised as targeting the wearing of the Muslim *hijab* in schools, “the consensus in the media was that *laïcité* was in peril and that Islam was the cause” (Bowen, 2007, 33). This perspective resonated strongly in the policy arena too: Hargreaves notes that “during the past 30 years Muslims have been the target of countless political polemics and a raft of government initiatives – such as the anti-headscarf law of 2004 and the anti-burqa law of 2010 – restricting their rights to practice their religion” (Hargreaves, 2015a, 240). This exclusivist political current has added the weight of officialdom to popular fears with the result that perceptions of Islam as a subversive force in French society have gained powerful momentum. The *banlieues*, the demographics of which are heavily influenced by immigration from countries of Muslim heritage, ground all these fears and concerns.

Second, and closely linked to the first point, the “ostensible social chaos of the (dis)organization of [*banlieues*] youth became a further source of anxiety in that it was seen to leave open a vacuum for the rise of ‘communitarian’ organizations, particularly Islamist groups” (Silverstein, 2008, 17). The last significant terrorist attacks on mainland France occurred in 1995 – “in the period from July to October 1995, seven terrorist attacks were carried out in Paris and Lyons, killing 10 people and wounding over 150” – but these events left a deep scar on the popular imagination (Foley, 2013, 25). It is worth quoting Silverstein (2008, 17) at length on this point:

For French government officials and media pundits, these [events] signified the birth of a third generation of immigrants in the 1990s, one founded in the transnational cross-linkages between youth indigenous to the French *banlieues* and those Islamist and Berberist militants who had fled the Algerian civil war to come to live in France [...] Anxieties over suburban housing projects serving as a node in an international terrorist network, which supposedly linked Algiers to Cologne to Sarajevo to Kabul to Iraq, have been magnified by the post-9/11 arrest of French-Moroccan Zacarias Moussaoui as the ‘20th September 11th hijacker’ and the discovery of several French citizens of North African parentage among the Taliban forces in Afghanistan and among the ‘foreign fighters’ in the Iraqi insurgency.

Furthermore, these long-standing fears regarding the nefarious ideological influences at play in the *banlieues* have been compounded by other geo-political events occurring since the turn of the millennium. For example, Hargreaves highlights the significance of the “initially small but growing numbers of young men in France, mainly from the *banlieues*, [who] have joined jihadist networks that have engaged in murderous attacks on French army and police officers” abroad (Hargreaves, 2015b, 4).

This leads to the third issue that has fuelled perceptions of the *banlieues* as hotbeds of Islamist terrorism: the tangible web of association between the *banlieues*, the French prison system and international terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS). While contemporary interest in issues around extremism rose sharply in the aftermath of the Charlie

Hebdo attacks and the subsequent atrocities in Paris, the nature and extent of Islamist radicalization in French prisons has been a subject of study for almost two decades.<sup>3</sup> The empirical research of Khosrokhavar (2014), in particular, reveals that the French prison system has played an important role as an incubator of sorts for radicalization. The high levels of crime and delinquency that characterise the *banlieues* mean that young people from these areas are heavily represented amongst the prison population. This is particularly the case with those of Muslim heritage. Beckford, Joly and Khosrokhavar (2005, 219) note that “the population of prisoners in France with a Muslim background consists mainly of young men from the *banlieues*”. This is significant, they argue, since, “a new type of ‘Muslim consciousness is developing in France. It is a process of Muslim identification which is visible in some *banlieues* and is accentuated in the closed worlds of prisons where [...] there are closer contacts with Islamists”. For some, this consciousness evolves into violent extremism, a process often accelerated through contact with terrorist groups and an “initiatory trip to the Muslim countries where Jihad is paramount”. Khosrokhavar (2015) provides a number of examples in this regard, including those of the Charlie Hebdo attackers:

Afghanistan and Pakistan (the case of Mohamed Merah who killed seven people in March 2012, three Muslim military and 4 Jews), Syria (Mehdi Nemmouch who killed on May 24, 2014 four people in the Jewish Museum of Brussels), Yemen (Cherif Kouachi who killed 12 people in Charlie Hebdo attacks on January 7, 2015 with his brother), Iraq. The trip confirms the Jihadist in his identity and his rupture with the European society where he has been raised and educated. Sometimes the meeting of a charismatic person like Jamel Beghal serves the same function, as in the case of Coulibaly who killed a female policeman and four Jews on 8 and 9 January 2015.<sup>4</sup>

This web of association nourishes fears that terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and IS have a growing ability to project their extremist ideology into France from the outside, where it takes hold among those with no allegiance to the Republic. These connections also form the backdrop to the aforementioned warlike discourse put forward by political elites in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Little surprise, then, that the ‘problem’ of the *banlieues* and their inhabitants was once again a focus of attention after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. For many, the events of January 2015 simply highlighted the extent of the threat posed by these areas to mainstream French society. Ever a community apart, marked by crime, delinquency and collective disorder, the logic goes, those of Muslim heritage living in the *banlieues* have now married their innate rejection of republican values with violent Islamist extremism. Young people in these areas have embraced a murderous and dystopian ideology that seems to complement and enhance their own longstanding disdain for French society. Not only is this thinking deeply flawed, however, it is also dangerous. To understand why, it is worth considering the lessons learned from the riots that erupted in *banlieues* across France in autumn 2005.

### **Searching for Identity in the Shadows of the Republic**

At first sight, riots and terrorism might seem an uncomfortable pairing. Certainly, the spontaneous nature of riots appears to be at odds with common representations of the insidious, lengthy process leading to violent Islamist extremism. Yet the coupling is not unreasonable when considered in terms of Roger Gould’s (2005) expansive understanding of social movements and “contentious collective action”. Recent research indicates that “presumed distinctions between riots and social

movements may not be quite as pure” as commonly believed. For example, Simiti (2012, 145) points out that “riots may take place within a social movement’s cycle of protest and social movements may emerge from riot events. In the latter case, the volatile, fragmented and contradictory elements of rioting are gradually transformed into more coherent, coordinated and sustained episodes of collective action”. Beyond this fluidity of being, both phenomena incorporate an important political dimension and are “dependent for their effectiveness on associational and informal networks” (Moran and Waddington, 2016, 186).

With regard to terrorism, Tarrow (2011) and others have demonstrated a link between this phenomenon and larger protest movements, subcultures and countercultures. Neumann (2013, 884) summarises this school of thought succinctly: “These movements can be amorphous and fairly unstructured, consisting of many different groups and organizations. Their members’ attitude is oppositional and anti-system, though not always consciously ‘political’ [...] they all draw on large repertoires of collective action”. Crucially, Neumann highlights the “seamlessness with which members of countercultural social movements move in and out of different kinds of collective action, including high-risk and violent activism” (Neumann, 2013, 884). In short, from Gould’s perspective, these are all expressions of contentious politics that can quite easily embrace violence of greater or lesser degrees, and thus worthy of comparison. Furthermore, for all their differences, both riots and terrorism are driven in large part by a profound sense of grievance, real or perceived, that relates to individual and/or group identity. And it is these shared characteristics, in my view, that make the comparison a useful intellectual exercise. What then, is significant about the French riots of 2005?

The now infamous events of Autumn 2005 unfolded over a period of three weeks and were unprecedented in their scale and intensity. The significance of the violence and destruction was reflected in the government’s decision to declare a state of emergency, drawing on laws dating from the Algerian War. In the wake of the 2005 riots, many academics took issue with the ‘official’ interpretation that reduced the disorder to the work of what then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy described as “*racailles et voyous*”, thugs expressing a powerful hate for French society (Moran, 2011). The context was entirely different from that of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks, but the theme underpinning the political response was similar: the idea that the *banlieues* harbor a nihilistic underclass who reject the values, laws and principles of the Republic and are willing to violently express this rejection. Furthermore, in both cases, the focus was on those in the *banlieues* of immigrant – and more particularly North African – origin.

Yet there is now considerable evidence to suggest that this view was fundamentally flawed and the riots were, instead, a revolt on the part of young *banlieusards* against the intolerable situation described above, and in particular their exclusion from mainstream society (Lapeyronnie, 2006; Kokoreff, 2008). The riots were devoid of structure and a clear ideological standpoint, since those involved exist outside the political institutions and often lack the means and the cultural capital (in the Bourdieusian sense of the term) to access these institutions, yet politically significant “since those involved ultimately [desired] recognition in this social order that excludes them” (Moran, 2011, 309). This interpretation views the violence of the riots through an Arendtian lens, that is to say as instrumental and “the hope of those who have no power” (Arendt, 1970, 52). In this context, the 2005 violence served as a means of “expressing the voice of the *banlieues* that is not normally heard beyond the territorial limits of these underprivileged areas” (Moran, 2011, 310). My own empirical research (2012, 271) indicates that the violence represented a plea for access to French society on the part of an excluded population rather than a rejection of the Republic: “For the rioters, acts of violence and destruction present themselves as a sure means of drawing attention

to their situation, of imposing their problems on a political landscape where their voices are not heard. The riots represented an attempt to forcefully enter the political arena – the desire being not to destroy for the sake of destruction, but rather to use the violence and destruction as a means of confronting the exclusion to which they are subject”.

It is here that the problems that contributed to the outbreak of the 2005 riots overlap with those contributing to radicalisation in the *banlieues*. My suggestion is not that the Charlie Hebdo attackers sought to gain access to French society, far from it. It is clear that the terrorists were wholly consumed by their commitment to death and destruction. Rather, my contention is that, at the genesis of their radicalization, these young men were subject to the same processes of exclusion and marginalisation as those involved in the 2005 riots, even if beyond this, the paths of these groups diverged enormously. Similar to those involved in the riots, their inclination was to resist this experience of exclusion in some way rather than simply accept it. This made these young people more vulnerable to the perverse and corrosive ideas, opinions and arguments that are at the heart of the radicalisation process.

Clearly, this interpretation immediately raises important questions. Principal among these is the matter of why so few individuals go down the path of violent extremism when conditions in the *banlieues* affect so many. This is a variant of the question perpetually posed in the context of public disorder: Why don't riots occur more frequently in areas with similar characteristics? Much attention has been devoted to understanding the nature of riots (e.g. Newburn, 2015; Tilly, 2003; Waddington, 1992), yet it is only relatively recently that scholars have made progress in efforts to explain the absence of riots. This work has mostly been from a comparative perspective, focusing on “the structural, socio-economic and political circumstances and social relations” (Newburn, 2016, 127). Not surprisingly, however, the unique challenges of studying the absence of a phenomenon mean that many questions remain and this is an area that requires further work.

Arguably, the challenge is even greater with regard to radicalisation and the move towards violent extremism, where debates are rarely conclusive and many uncertainties remain. Take the connection between poverty and terrorism, for example. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the idea of a causal link between economic deprivation and terrorism gained momentum. This view was subsequently challenged by scholars such as Krueger and Maleckova (2003) and Sageman (2004). In the French context, a study by Bouzar went so far as to suggest that “French jihadis were majority upper class, of ethnic French extraction, and children of educators” (Hegghammer, 2016). Yet none of this research is conclusive, and Hegghammer has argued convincingly that the link between poverty and terrorism does in fact hold some merit in the European context (Hegghammer, 2016). The study of radicalisation and the move towards violent extremism holds additional challenges to the extent that advancement on this path depends heavily on a multitude of factors, such as the ability to and extent of engagement with extremist networks, be it in the ether or in the local community, attraction to ideology, and individual perceptions regarding opportunities and costs. And at no point is the final transition to violent extremism guaranteed. This means that explaining the lack of progress down the path of radicalisation is far more difficult than deconstructing the journey of a terrorist after the event.

This said, there is considerable agreement around Krueger and Maleckova's argument that, in general terms, terrorism is best viewed “as a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings of indignity and frustration” (2003, 119). This relationship between the political dimension and a profound sense of grievance is one that frequently frames progress towards violent extremism and there is value in exploring its manifestations in various contexts, however limited, particularly

somewhere like the *banlieues* where it features so prominently and the population is, in many respects, extremely vulnerable.

And so we return to the question of identity. Many of those who live in the suburbs are “discriminated against due to their real or supposed origins and their identity as *banlieusards*” (Moran, 2011, 303). This everyday, protracted experience of discrimination compounds already existing problems of social and economic exclusion and leaves many in the *banlieues* feeling disconnected from French society. This disconnect is not recognised in the political arena, where the challenge has, for many years now, been interpreted in terms of the need for immigrant populations to integrate into French society. Yet this perspective has become distorted and conventional thinking on the challenge of reducing the gap between the *banlieues* and mainstream society perpetuates the malady rather than offering a cure. Dominique Vidal (2005, 20) captured the essence of the problem around the time of the 2005 riots, when he took issue with the use of the term ‘integration’ in political and media rhetoric:

Il séduit [...] il semble admettre le respect de la culture, des traditions, de la langue et de la religion [...] Mais, à l’usage, il s’avère piégé. Dès lors que l’intégration ne fonctionne pas, c’est en effet vers les jeunes des banlieues que se pointe un doigt accusateur, comme pour leur demander: ‘Pourquoi ne faites-vous pas l’effort de vous intégrer?’ Au lieu de se tourner vers une société incapable d’assurer l’égalité des droits et des chances à tous ses enfants, quelles que soient leur origine, la couleur de leur peau, la consonance de leurs prénom et nom.

This was the situation at the time of the riots in 2005, and little has changed for the better since then.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if anything, the frustration caused by this impossible situation has continued to mount. For Hargreaves (2015b, 2), one of the few certainties in this complex tale of radicalization in France “is the immense distance that many in the *banlieues* now feel between themselves and mainstream French society”. Calls for integration sound loudly in the *banlieues*, but their effect is corrosive and they serve as a constant reminder that young people in these areas – legitimate French citizens – continue to be viewed as outsiders due to their real or supposed origins as immigrants with particular cultural and ethnic traits. The great irony here is that “the exclusionary attitudes and practices that have long prevented these groups from participating on an equal footing in the life of the nation have tended increasingly to lead them toward alternative forms of socialization that resemble the *communautarisme* long warned against by self-appointed guardians of France’s so-called republican model of integration” (Hargreaves, 2015b, 4).

The result of all this is a profound crisis of identity. The most “potent forms of ethnic identification have generally been those associated with nationhood”, yet those of immigrant origin who inhabit the *banlieues* do not feel part of the French nation (Hargreaves, 2007, 140). And in a country where nationhood has, since revolutionary times, been conceived in political terms and expressed through citizenship, their identity as French citizens appears compromised and inaccessible. So arise the cognitive openings that can serve as a gateway to the radicalization process. Cut adrift from French society, with their worldview marked by a strong sense of injustice and grievance, these young people seek to ground their identity elsewhere. For some, this process can lead to a stronger attachment to territory, with local youths investing more heavily in the symbolic importance of their locale as ‘turf’ to be defended from rival groups, the police (with whom relations in the *banlieues* are abysmal), and society at large. This was clear in my own

fieldwork in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-Le-Bel, where the identity of many of my interviewees was framed very much in terms of shared territorial attachment.

For others, it “sparks a process of religious seeking in which they search for answers to pressing concerns through religious meaning” (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 13). Of these, a minority will progress down the path of radicalization, their search bringing them into the orbit of radical activists, whose efforts in person and online are aimed at providing an interpretative framework within which the perceived grievances of the individual will be accommodated, amplified, refined and, ultimately reinforced through a process of socialisation. In this sense, the exclusion of the *banlieues* by mainstream society contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Khosrokhavar alluded to this process and its potentially disastrous consequences in a recent article: “Young people in the banlieues, marginalized and with few prospects, feel like victims. They become prime targets for jihadist propaganda”. Disillusioned young people who feel that they are not permitted a stake in French society, despite full membership of the national community, tap into a “shared network of meaning” that is underpinned by anger, frustration and incomprehension. The community of Islamist radicals offers a welcome anchor for identity, providing “the basis of a common identity” that goes some way towards addressing the identity crisis mentioned above (Khosrokhavar, 2016). Yet those who succumb to this process and embrace the worldview carefully cultivated by radical activists can find themselves engaged in a destructive spiral: progressively investing in an ideology that justifies and encourages “high risk activism, such as support for violence” (Wiktorowicz, 2005, 6). For a few, such as the Kouachi brothers, this path can end up in acts of violent extremism.

## Conclusion

From the mid-1990s onwards, France developed an international reputation for the robust and effective nature of its approach to counter-terrorism. Marked by a “zero-tolerance attitude to Islamic extremism”, the French authorities integrated “special anti-terrorism procedures into their criminal justice system, which has allowed them to be more draconian in their application of such powers” (Foley, 2013, 316). This approach appeared largely successful; France avoided the type major terrorist attacks that hit the United States in 2001 and London in 2005. Indeed, Foley (2015) notes that “British, US and other government delegations used to visit Paris to learn from how the French were combating jihadist networks”. Yet the Charlie Hebdo tragedy and subsequent terrorist attacks revealed the limits of France’s counter-terrorism strategy.

The problem with the French approach is that it is largely reactive in nature. Foley notes that the country’s “intelligence capability and knowledge of jihadist networks is extensive, its police forces are hard-hitting, its anti-terrorism laws draconian”. Yet the state has a poor track record in terms of addressing radicalization at the early stages. The government has been aware of the problem with Islamist radicalization in French prisons for some time, yet it was only after the Charlie Hebdo attacks “that measures were announced to counter the mounting risk of the country’s prisons becoming recruitment centres for many more homegrown extremists” (Henley, 2016). The accumulation of recent attacks has forced the government to consider other preventative measures too. In recent months, France has explored the UK government’s Prevent strategy with a view to drawing lessons on combating radicalization. And in early 2015, French Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem (2015) announced “les onze mesures de la grande mobilization de l’École pour les valeurs de la République”, which prioritised plans to change how laïcité and republican values are taught in French schools.

These efforts to prevent radicalization are laudable, but they do not address certain key root causes of the problem. The first measure of the eleven announced by Ms. Vallaud-Belkacem (2015) seeks to “renforcer la transmission des valeurs de la République” by better equipping teachers to engage with students on questions of citizenship, laïcité and discrimination. This approach perpetuates the flawed notion that the problem lies with ethnic minorities and their failure to fully integrate into French society. And for young people of Muslim heritage who experience discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis in the *banlieues*, it will simply emphasise the injustice of their situation and add to the sense of shared grievance that pervades life in these areas. This analytical perspective does not undermine the agency of those who embrace Islamist extremism, the process here is, ultimately, a rational one. Nor does it seek to highlight particular drivers of terrorism over others. As Smelser (2007, 8) notes in his discussion of causation in the context of terrorism: “it is possible to identify several different kinds of causes, ranging from very general (remote), to highly specific (immediate) causes”. Rather it highlights the complexity of the issues at stake and the scale of the challenge facing the government and French society more broadly.

To effectively combat radicalization and violent extremism, France must extend its efforts to addressing the sociocultural divide that separates the *banlieues* from mainstream society. The starting point should be to challenge the flawed thinking that has represented the inhabitants of the French *banlieues* as a “suspect community” in political and popular discourse (Breen-Smyth, 2014). Concentrations of the most underprivileged members of French society, these areas exist at the limits of the Republic and evoke fear in the popular imagination. Residents of these areas, particularly those of Muslim heritage whose origins lie in the former colonies of northern Africa, are viewed as outsiders despite being legitimate members of French society. At stake here, are the failings of the French model of integration: those who reside in the *banlieues* are asked to integrate into a society that refuses them access. This particular lived experience of exclusion fosters confusion and frustration, and contributes to an identity crisis which, in turn, creates space for the cognitive openings that can open the door to radicalization and, ultimately, violent extremism. The French government have, for decades, failed to address the problem and, as a result, deep-rooted grievances have been permitted to mature and develop. These grievances hold powerful destructive potential if left to develop unchecked.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth study of radicalization in France, see Khosrokhavar, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise summary of the challenges facing the *banlieues*, see Mucchielli, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> For a study of radicalization in French prisons see Khosrokhavar, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Jamel Beghal was strongly linked to Al Qaeda and convicted of involvement in a 2001 plot to bomb the US Embassy in France.

<sup>5</sup> The protracted nature of the problem was highlighted in a recent, insightful article by Chrisafis, 2015a.

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